



THE RED/BLUE LINE

Sunday, August 31, 2008

Every Sunday CUIP's president Jacqueline Salit and strategist and philosopher Fred Newman watch the political talk shows and discuss them. Here are excerpts from their dialogue on Sunday, August 31, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: Some of the Sunday talk is that through his vice presidential selection, John McCain became a maverick again because Sarah Palin's an unconventional choice, etc. But here's something that looks like a contradiction to me. She went up against the Republican Party in Alaska, where there's been corruption, the Bridge to Nowhere, etc. So, she's a maverick because she went up against her own party, and she brings that spirit to the ticket and she'll bring that spirit to Washington. But, another thread to her story is that a motivation for selecting her, as opposed to some others that were on the short list (like Tom Ridge or Joe Lieberman) is that she is strongly pro-life, she inspires the social conservative base and, in effect, solidifies the Republican Party because that's who she is. If I were charting this course for them, I would be thinking about whether and how you can make those two things work. She goes up against her party, and that's what makes her a maverick and restores McCain's maverick identity, part one. Part two: she's all about the party and all about making sure the party stays connected to its strengths, to its social conservative base, which has to be energized and come out in big numbers for McCain to win. Can the Republicans make those two story lines work?

Newman: I don't wish to be glib here but my guess is that a substantial number of people who the Republicans are counting on getting support from – women, the conservative base, blue collar workers and so on – might well take the position that she'd be a great candidate, if only she were from the United States.

Salit: That should take some heat off the charge that Obama is a foreigner!

Newman: I would speculate a lot of Americans are saying *Alaska? She's the governor of Alaska? And, before that, she was the mayor of a town called what?* I don't want to insult anybody, including people from small towns. But, Cindy McCain argued that Palin's foreign policy experience derives from the fact that Alaska is very close to Russia.

Salit: Yes, that was an unfortunate talking point that some idiot gave her. It makes Palin sound like a character from that movie "The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming."

Newman: Who knows? Palin could turn out to be the most popular person in the whole election season.

Salit: It wouldn't be the first time motherhood trumped everything else!

Newman: I think people are correctly saying that interest in a vice presidential selection, no matter who that candidate is, tends to wear off rather quickly. Maybe the Republicans wanted Hurricane Gustav to wear it off. She might be sidelined in favor of *Well, we went down to handle Gustav*. A lot of it depends on the vagaries of a projected Level 3 hurricane, or whatever it turns out to be.

Salit: Maybe she'll change her position that global warming is not manmade. Honestly, this moment is a little bit difficult to discuss. On the one hand, you can talk about it at the level of "how does it play," and there are various things that one can say about this. How does it play because she's a woman? How does it play because she's a social conservative? How does it play because she's the mother of five children? And that has an appeal to lots of people, including mothers.

Newman: I thought you were going to say, *including mothers of four children*.

Salit: Exactly. Anyway, there are these "marketing" issues one could discuss. But there's something weird about talking about things in that vein when there's an economic crisis, there's an energy crisis, there's a highly unstable international situation.

Newman: And this is the presidency and the vice presidency of the United States of America we're talking about.

Salit: Yes. So, I know it's about lining up the voters you need in order to win the presidency, but this one might be a bridge too far, if not a bridge to nowhere. Nonetheless, it's what we're stuck with. So, let's soldier on. The election has so far been framed as the choice between change and experience. Everybody agrees change won in the Democratic primary. Now the argument is that it goes further, that it's been established the mood of the American people and the desire of the American people is for change. While experience counts for something, they're not looking to elect somebody who, as Cokie Roberts said, is the spokesperson for the status quo. The McCain people say, fine, so it's about change. We pick Governor Palin because that's how we get into the change game. I don't know, Fred. They certainly succeeded in changing the conversation. That's one of the things they wanted. They wanted to take Obama and the Democratic convention off the front pages and put McCain and the Republicans on the front pages. They succeeded in doing that. Arguably, that was going to happen anyway because the Democratic convention was over and

the Republican convention is beginning. So, you were going to get some of that, in any event. But changing the conversation is not the same thing as changing the country. Then there is the argument that some reporters, like Elisabeth Bumiller from *The Times*, who's been covering McCain for a long time, suggests and that John Kerry made very aggressively in the Stephanopoulos interview with him, namely that this vice presidential selection underscores that the Republican Party and McCain are captive to the social conservative movement, to the far right wing of the party.

Newman: They don't see themselves as "captive." They see themselves as expressive of a movement which has controlled the country, through the presidency and the vice presidency, for the last eight years. They don't see that as being captive at all. They want to distinguish that movement from the Bush presidency, including that Bush's failing is that he didn't go far enough in that direction and they're going to go further. One might argue that Palin is almost the opposite of Dick Cheney. Dick Cheney was the man responsible for all the bad stuff that happened. Bush was controlled by him. Palin is not in control of what's going on now. She's much more of an outsider. Dick Cheney is, in fact, the ultimate insider. I don't know that it shows what Kerry was arguing, that the Republican Party is captive to the right wing. No, I see it as saying, *Hello! The country is close to 50% conservative, the unpopularity of the war or Bush and Cheney notwithstanding. And, they say, that 50% will be represented. What we'll settle for right now, say McCain and the handlers of the Republican Party, is a 50/50 race.* That's good enough for them. The alternative is a sure loss. Those are the options here. They want a head-on red/blue race. In that, the Republicans feel, they have a real shot. They're trying to go for the red/blue election. Does it work? I don't know.

Salit: Interesting. The talk shows today featured one section of the Obama speech where he said relative to our armed forces: "They don't serve a red America or a blue America. They serve the United States of America." That's a statement designed to appeal to a sense that the American people want to get beyond those kinds of divisions.

Newman: Which kinds of divisions?

Salit: The red/blue divisions.

Newman: But, I think it's fair to say that the opinion of most people, of many people surely, is that they want to get beyond the red/blue division as long as their side, be it red or blue, wins.

Salit: I wouldn't disagree with that at all.

Newman: The Republicans are trying to say: *Yes, some mistakes have been made. No one's pointed them out better than McCain. Palin is the same kind of person. She points out mistakes. But, underneath it all, what we have in this country is still a basic red/blue division. No one thinks that that should carry over to the troops. What Obama is saying is simply silly. That doesn't happen on the battlefield, and everyone knows that. But, the voting mass of the American people are still voting off of that red/blue division. And they're going to hold onto that. To the extent that Obama talks the way he does, it's because of his naïveté about the reality of the red/blue division in this country.* They're going to try to make him the silly one who doesn't appreciate where the country is at.

Salit: They will try to paint him as naïve.

Newman: Yes, their line is he's naïve, not Palin. Will it play? It'll play. I don't know if it'll win. But it'll play.

Salit: How did you like the Democratic convention?

Newman: I was slightly sympathetic, I must say, to whomever it was who said it was a little too Romanesque, too colossal. Obama has to be careful with that. He can't set himself up as Abraham Lincoln. He hasn't won a national election yet. Even the elections that he did win were somewhat fluky. If you want to hammer him on the experience issue, he's even inexperienced at winning elections. So I thought the set was a little over the top. It's kind of how you feel about a show in Vegas. On the one hand, you say, "Wow. That's extraordinary. That's so amazing!" On the other hand, you can say...

Salit: "It's a little garish for my taste."

Newman: Yes, you might say, *Can we cut out all the glitter and just hear Sinatra sing?* But that was their choice. I didn't have a very strong reaction to it, either way. I already know that Obama's a great speechmaker. So, I didn't learn anything new about that. Was it the greatest speech I've ever heard in my life? I don't know how to measure that.

Salit: Howard Fineman's comment on *The Chris Matthews Show* about the speech was that they had one message they wanted to get across: that Obama has the strength to be president. David Axelrod told him when they were standing in the tunnel on their way into the stadium, 'This is our pre-emptive strike. This is our pre-rebuttal. That's the message that we want to put across. He's got the goods to be president. He can handle being president.'

Newman: Well, either of them could handle being president. I don't know if it's about whether each can handle the presidency.

Salit: What's it about?

Newman: It's about two social forces, which have now reached rough parity, fighting it out in a heavyweight championship, around the issues each side cares about most deeply. The Republicans, under substantial influence from their right wing, have for years wanted to turn this whole thing into a morality war. And they still do. The Democrats want to turn it into a New Deal version of a moral war, but re-vivified in a form of liberalism that's populist. It might be that's exactly what the country is longing for right now. So the Democrats see this as an opportunity to assert that. It's kind of Roosevelt vs. Reagan. Again, it's not only the presidency at stake. It's going to be the whole of Washington. Throw out the corrupt Republicans, they say. But the Republicans say, "We're not corrupt. What's been going on is a corruption of what we've always stood for." Right wing conservatism is going to take one more shot at that because that's what they've got. If they don't go with that, they have no game at all. They can't bring in the likes of Mitt Romney as vice president or as president. They can't bring in any type of vaguely liberal Republicanism and, after the kind of eight years we just had with Bush, go up against the likes of Barack Obama and all that goes with him. They can't run that campaign. That's a bad campaign. I'm sure Rove told them that really early on. That campaign is out of the question.

Salit: A total loser.

Newman: Social conservatism has powered the Republican majority. To use a boxing metaphor, until the Democrats knock them out, you've got to have some degree of respect for that. You always favor the champion until he's knocked out. The Republicans, for all their lack of popularity, have not yet been knocked out. So, you fight your fight until the challenger knocks you out. Obama certainly knocked the Clintons out. But, he hasn't knocked the right wing out, not yet. If the Republicans can make it clear that's what's at stake, it could be close to a 50/50 race. But, we don't know. Maybe this new generation, generation X or Y or whatever it is, is ready to step up to the plate and knock the right wing out. Prior generations, whatever they were called, let the right wing in. So, it should be an interesting campaign. By the way, in the *Terminator* movies, isn't the mother who lives in the past but determines the future named Sarah?

Salit: Yes, Fred. She is.